

BLOOD ETC.

Gee Williams

The house, Carousel – a piss-poor, schmaltzy, inappropriate name for a buff-brick nineteen-thirties house, he thought – stood at a bit of a crossroads. Not a roundabout, which might at least have made explicable the overlarge sign they were always meaning to get changed. Just a crossroads. A crossing of two unimportant minor roads, neither of which provided the best or shortest route to the built-up areas they joined together. Tatten Lane passed under Carousel's front wall. It brought sporadic traffic to annoy anyone attempting to read in the sitting room or sleep in the guest bedroom, before it wandered off in the direction of the river and the old packhorse bridge. Only an ugly bungalow (dwarfed by stables the size and shape of a modern factory unit) stood between Carousel and where Dial Green petered out. The wider Old Wrexham Road ran along the side of the house. It made for the country town with more obvious brio but was kept at bay by a large, shrubby garden and the remains of an ancient orchard. In season its ripe fruit, spurned by the inhabitants of Carousel, still fell from the branches, rolled onto the tarmac and were pulped by passing cars...

Or were snatched up by the more quick-witted of the animals being chivvied to and from Tatten Livery by a succession of lithe, young riders. All female.

When they moved in Mel must've been one of the first locals he'd become aware of: a young girl – that's the

mistake he'd made and only when already close enough for speech had Alun clocked how, under the hat – the *helmet* – there was a girl/woman.

Round, fresh face. Dark, slightly protuberant eyes under fleshy lids. Freckles across the nose and upper cheekbones. When she smiled it was with rows of small regular teeth, though a shade too ivory for perfection. When she swept off the hat, whose black silk cover had slipped askew giving her a bit of a tipsy air, the red hair sprang shocking out.

Sixteen he reckoned. (Afterwards, after the accident and the passing around of fragments of that day's happening as though they were a new currency the whole neighbourhood had gone over to, he'd found she was nearer twenty.)

'Let him have it!' he'd suggested as he saw the huge horse snatch at the bit, lunge forward in its quest for fruit and the rider with equal determination haul on the reins. 'Let him have an apple. They're only going to waste.'

'That's not the point!' Mel had snapped back.

'Isn't it?'

The horse swung immense, brown hindquarters at Alun's face and he dodged back to the sanctuary of steps up to his gate. A spark was kindled as the iron shoe struck a stone where an instant ago his own feet had stood. He'd never seen that before, but then he'd not had much to do with horses before. 'Why isn't it?'

Breathing hard with the effort the girl circled the horse and its threatening hooves out into the lane before turning its head in Alun's direction as though the animal were a boat in a heavy swell and Alun waiting on the dockside. 'Because,' she said, still panting, 'he mustn't think – stand up, Samson, stand up! – he mustn't think when he's working he can just stop for something to eat. When he wants. He has to—' but in giving her attention to Alun for the moment it took to frame the reply, Samson had shot out his muzzle and grabbed up a half-apple from the gutter. The blunt lower jaw slid from side to side as the fruit was

pulverised and the juice ran. And there was nothing Mel could do to hinder it.

‘Seems to me,’ said Alun, ‘that’s exactly what he can do.’ Mel had let out a hoot of laughter and slapped the blissfully masticating brute on its arched neck. ‘I know! He’s a greedy sod. Just look at the weight on him.’

It gave him a thrill that voice. Not because it was anything special. Not because of its light, girly tone and easy half-Welsh, half-English border accent. But because it was not the voice of a three-year-old boy – the only other, apart from his own, he heard all day. Not that looking after the child, his child, was bad – how could he ever allow himself to think that? Or if it was, when it was, it couldn’t be blamed on Charlie. That day, the day he’d first spoken to Mel, he’d retraced his steps and picked the boy from the lawn and hoisting him onto his shoulders had said, ‘Come and see the big horse, Charlie,’ and Charlie had shrieked with excitement at the movement and new elevation.

‘Hor-orse! Hor-orse!’ the child demanded.

‘D’you want a ride Charlie, hey? A ride on the horse? Can he?’ he added almost as a formality and in the act of passing the small body from his own shoulders to the animal’s neck.

Samson’s head jerked towards his massive chest as he reined back one stride, two strides, out of reach. ‘No, sorry,’ Mel said. The action had seemed like a rejection from the horse itself but now he realised it was just a trick, a manoeuvre inspired by some signal of hand and heel that he’d missed. ‘Too dangerous. The kid could get hurt.’ She sent further directions to the beast – ah, yes, he saw that one: the left boot tap, the right rein twitched – and away they went leaving him standing, the child still offered up in his arms.

The kid? Alun’s temper kindled at the slight. *The kid?* Immersed for the better part of Charlie’s short life in Charlie’s care, his desire to indulge the boy was affectively maternal though masculine in sheer force. His own belief in

Charlie's status as a small but priceless household god was rarely subject to challenge.

'Miserable bitch,' he muttered.

But she was right. Imagine the possibilities, the explanations and Holly's face, angry, flushed and incredulous. *You did what? And then what? Christ Alun, what the fuck were you thinking of?*

What the fuck had he been thinking of? Of course she was right.

And a good thing not to have taken against Mel, newcomer as he was. No one the length of the straggling, half-pretty place had a word to say against Mel and he soon learned why. She and Samson were local celebrities. Twice daily they'd make their way through the alarums and excursions of The Square to gain access to the old bridleway running over the hill, mile after mile. Local lads – rough as they looked – raised unironic open bottles to them as they passed in front of the Penty Arms or the Full Moon. *Mel and Samson had once been on television.* You don't go disrespecting someone who's been interviewed for nearly a minute on *Wales Today*. And Mel acknowledged them. Though she came from The Old Rectory, though her father was a consultant at Maelor Ears, Nose and Throat – and wealthy enough to keep a jobless daughter and a vast, money-munching horse – Mel acknowledged them. (*Hi- yer, Scott! See you, then, Tim!* The first time Alun witnessed it, he found himself troubled with unaccountable pain). She nodded to Scott and Tim and the weaselly Neil. She nodded to the driver of the ad-daubed single-decker bus that backed up onto the garage forecourt rather than crowd Dial Green's star. In the store, Mel and Samson's success at the last Royal Welsh Show remained prominent, if yellowing, in the window. The horse's bulk improbably hovered over a construction of striped poles and Mel's small figure, well out of the saddle, hovered above him. Gravity, the picture demonstrated, gravity – for those with the knack – was a sometime force.

On local radio, one endless afternoon, ‘a young Dial Green rider proves unbeatable’ was actually the before-these-and-other-stories headline. Or it was until an explosion at the soap-powder plant knocked it out of its slot.

One endless afternoon...

In the city where he and Holly’d met, in the tight, modern flat they’d brought Charlie home to, the afternoons hadn’t had so many hours in them. It was something to do with the view, he decided. In the city you were connected to a squirming vista, opening up and closed down by high-sided traffic so that pass the window on your way to the kitchen and a whole Victorian canyon of buildings terminated only in the distant prospect of the Cathedral – look again on your return trip and the Japanese tourists in a coach not ten feet away smiled up at you, edgily courteous. Beyond your window, in any half-day period (the time between Holly popping in to breastfeed Charlie his lunch, say, and the first hope of her return) – beyond your window was bound to offer something in the way of a buzz. A rear-ending with or without rage, an assisted fall from a bike... a dog’s suicidal dash into the carriageway, lead flapping. He had enjoyed a bag-snatch, a police car’s totalling against a concrete bollard and an old lady’s collapse and removal by paramedics without accompanying siren – so a probable death right there as he watched.

‘How awful!’ Holly had murmured over her pasta.

A jolt. Yes, it was awful, wasn’t it, another human being subsiding beneath you, breathing her last next to the teak-effect structure holding communal bins?

In Dial Green there was no movie running constantly within the window frame. No free, chaotic fringe-show. There was a painting. The trees in the redundant orchard made him cranky with their sluggish ways. ‘When are we going to see some apples on those things?’

‘Don’t be impatient – the blossom’s only just fallen.’ Holly was country-bred as Charlie was going to be. Holly had been

accurate in this as in most else. Apples had appeared in pointless, messy profusion – and he'd spoken to Mel.

Was it the height of the horse that meant she always had him at a disadvantage? It was a couple of weeks later. The boy was having a nap and Alun was released into the September sunshine and free from the nagging vigilance of care. Mel had surprised him on his own property. He was caught examining fruit still attached to a squat, cankerous branch of apple that was becoming lost in an unpruned briar.

'I'll bet you've got enough there for a ton of jam.'

He spun round to see her head and shoulders above the hedge. Slowly, weirdly, the disembodied living bust slid along the shaggy hedge-top, turned and slid back to its original position but facing the other way.

'Jam?'

The fruit already picked that was in his free hand he dropped to the grass.

'Well if it was me, I'd do cider. I think the old bid lived here before you did cider. Always had a smile on her face.'

He shrugged. Beyond the hawthorn the horse snorted and a V-sign of brown ears flicked up.

He could play the townie: 'All this – it needs cutting back. I thought – probably get someone in to do it. Someone who knows what they're doing. Not my thing – all this.'

It was the truth – the near truth. That morning Holly had suggested he harvest and stew fruit for Charlie's tea. ('They must be organic, right? I mean we've been here since the spring. Nobody's sprayed them.') Patiently, whilst fending off his help to zip up the grey dress, shaking out the black jacket, matador-style, she'd explained. How you just peeled a good big apple, cut it up, cooked it in a pan, stirred in that Manuka honey she's just managed to get hold of that was going to be good for Charlie's gripy tummy. How it wasn't rocket science for Chrissake.

But what was a good apple? Not bruised... not already

home to a tetchy wasp. Even on the tree every fruit he examined had some sort of mark or excavation. Did this mean it was not good?

‘So what is your thing then?’

‘Well – what do I do, d’you mean?’

‘If you like.’

‘I’m on a break at the moment.’

‘Sick leave is it?’ It was said, he felt, with a challenge in the tone even though it hadn’t made it onto the face.

Cow! He really didn’t want to get into this. But where was the refuge from the smiling down, provocative child – yes, child he still thought her. This must be innocence rather than goading – surely? A misreading. Of something not meant or not understood. Not yet experienced. In your thirties you were about as far away from teenagers as you were going to get: twice their years, off the pace of their culture but still with only babies and toddlers amongst your friends and in your own house – so no new perspective there either...

‘A career break. We’ve got the little fellow in there.’ *Bollocksfuckinbollocks.* ‘We-er had the kid, you know and one of us had to take a break. Holly, that’s my partner, she helps run a business. It’s a leather factory, if you know what that is. They deal in all types of leather. It’s in the city – in Chester. She runs it really. So it was easier for me to... just till we get him off to school. It’s good. It’s been good. I...’

‘Yeah? See you.’

The truck that was suddenly there beside him on the Wrexham Road, its air brakes hissing, was a sort of comfort. It drove off Samson with his inquisitive passenger and allowed Alun to get inside, though appleless... Charlie, must check on Charlie.

Up in the small bed with its racing-car modelling, the boy slept on, one finger hooked into his light brown curls. He knelt beside him and gently pulled down the child’s hand and, though gummed with chocolate, tucked it beneath the quilt – for what reason? Did he want to wake him? No, of

course not and yes, he needed to have Charlie awake so that he could make amends in play or treats. He needed to make up to Charlie for the disquiet that had come over him out there in the orchard, being questioned by that brainless girl. *Sick leave!* But the boy, though he stirred, burrowed down again into sleep. Against the weight of the covering, the sticky fingers flapped uselessly and stilled. He ought to wake him – tonight as they attempted to eat off their separate trays, Charlie, alert and demanding, would give the game away. Cantering laps of the room, pretending to showjump Holly's outstretched legs and failing – and delighting in the failure with thought-numbing screams.

How long did you leave this child down?

That afternoon he found a machete-type thing in one of the locked outhouses they had yet to clear out. With the boy still sleeping soundly he took it to the briars in the hedge and several other overgrown bushes he couldn't identify; he hacked and decapitated with wired intensity. *Sick leave.* As though hawking around cheap (slash) fucking rancid (slash) hides was such a big deal. As though minding (slash) your own child (slash) was so (slash) fucking off the fucking wall. As though sticking manfully to the cause of Durward (slash) Leather Ltd was going to find the cure for cancer.

'And is it all chugging along as normal at Skin City?' he asked Holly almost before she'd put down her keys and looked around for Charlie, 'He's that heap of sand, by the way, driving the fire engine.'

'Oh, well done Alun!' Holly was out of the back door, picking her way down the uneven path in black five-inch heels. 'Hello yuk-mush!' She picked the giggling Charlie up and carried him in at arm's length. 'You could get him cleaned up when you know I'm coming home. What time is it? It's gone seven for FS.'

'You like to bath him on a Friday. You said...'

'I know. *I know.* But you could have given him a lick and a promise first.'

‘I’ll do it now. Just give him to me.’

‘Doesn’t matt...’

The pair disappeared up the stairs. Ten minutes later, changed, different, all smiles, they were back... Charlie standing on the rug between them, his unclouded blue eyes fixed on Holly’s face – *as they did the instant the very instant the exact instant she came into a room.*

‘Early frost, eh?’ This from the student working out the summer’s end at the garage, behind armoured glass. Alun had spoken to him a couple of times, knew more than he needed to know, now, about his parents’ giving up the farm, his course in Forestry at Bangor, his debts. No name.

‘Is it?’

‘Well – yeah. Don’t usually get it white over, not October, do we?’

He pocketed the card – ‘To be honest, I haven’t a clue’ – never for a second taking his attention from the VW out on the forecourt, from Charlie, trapped in his seat, staring good-naturedly about him.

An October frost – that was meant to mean something was it? Put on the spot, he realised, he couldn’t have told the exact date and would’ve had to grope for the month. As he sat, feet up on the kitchen table and the Driving section of last Sunday’s paper open before him, he made a point of noting *October 10, 2004*. So – today was the 12th... a date completely without significance of any sort. It wasn’t a day away from that important decision on his productivity bonus. No new and fragile contact at The Club Chair Company needed to be inveigled out to lunch. And as for that flight to Stuttgart the lamebrain Julie had forgotten to book, it had turned out to be no bad thing because that had been the week World of Bags had come back to him with the biggest, single...

Swinging down numbed legs he was straight up onto his feet. The paper slipped into its constituent pages onto the

floor and he crumpled it for the recyc rather than bother with reassembly. How pathetically easy it was for the brain to stumble into this sort of thing! Present events, hateful as they unfold but their edges gradually smoothed over by memory to become cosy, funny: to become *Well, of course, at the time, while you're doing it, it can be an absolute nightmare but you get a real rush when you pull off a...*

An early frost, was it? OK. A spur to replacing those broken flags before the weather worsened, before Holly in her beautiful brush-dyed, scarlet leather knee-highs went arse over tit. Charlie was uncomplaining as, rebuttoned into a jacket, he was piggybacked outside. 'Right, Charles William Mann, your mission, should you chose to accept it, is to lever up these broken bits, stack them out of sight behind the outhouse because Daddy has no idea what you're meant to do with spare bits of path and then bring those four new slabs that have been sitting round the front for over a month and drop them neatly into place. They will of course be a perfect fit.'

Charlie, nodding, made a move to pick up the crowbar (another outhouse find) but when Alun said, 'No! That's for Daddy to use,' a cynical look crossed his three-year-old face. He trotted off in the direction of the swing singing 'Per-erflect fit, per-erflect fit' in his clear treble.

'Don't worry there'll be something for you in a minute...' Alun couldn't think what though. 'And then you can help me with the really hard part, yeah?' The child didn't even favour this one with a backward glance. The path was history. Down the garden, that's where it was happening... determination to be there was written into his spine, in his arms swinging, despite the padded coat. But small for his age: the observation came accompanied by a slight niggle, a psychic pinprick. Was Charlie destined to be not only light-boned and pale as Holly but also more Holly-beneath-the-skin? Attention easily focused and biddable as a tuning button, cutting from this to that message, the fuzzy to the sharp. Nothing ever got to

Holly, as they said at the Chester office, because Holly *didn't let it*.

The stack of four flags – no five flags, one for breakages, of course – was nestling in its fringe of long grass behind the front hedge. Misjudging size Alun rammed them with the wheelbarrow – and did it again. He could at least have offered Charlie a ride around in the barrow, something that never failed to delight. When he'd got this first one shifted, he'd do it for the next and the next. He bent to the task.

From beyond the hedge, there were three distinct sounds. (Later he'd be able to work out that these were the incident itself and everything else its aftermath.) First came a female voice: a shout that began as 'Whoah-h!' but carried on beyond the word as 'oh-oh-oh!' until drowned out by the second noise, an easily identifiable squeal of brakes. This ended in a thud, dull but with metallic overtones. There were a few seconds of silence during which Alun let go the slab almost trapping his own fingers and stood up. Just over the hedge, but very close to it, was the silver roof of an estate car. He had a moment to recognise it (he was good on cars) as a Mercedes when a new sound started up. It was the worst thing he had heard in his life: a deep, throaty bellow that rose and slackened, rocketed up to an almost unbearable pitch before subsiding into a thick gurgle. Another bellow – more gurgling – a blessed pause – and a horrible human-like scream.

The steps down onto the road were almost blocked by the car's bonnet but he fought the hawthorn to get out. Hidden by the car but now directly ahead of him he came across Mel. She was lying on her side, one arm beneath her head, which was turned toward him. Her eyes were wide open and apparently staring into his. Her hat was still in place though pushed back so that strands of bright red hair were on show and there was a long black mark across her cheek. As he knelt down to touch her face and speak a word to her, the offside door of the Mercedes (with its dented panel) began

to swing open. It would, he saw, catch the unmoving Mel in its arc. Angrily he placed both fists on the door and slammed it shut. A face behind the glass – with an open mouth – registered with him as nobody, neither man nor woman.

‘Stay in!’ he shouted at it. Dimly he was aware that in the vehicle’s interior someone had begun to cry.

Mel blinked.

‘It’s all right but you shouldn’t move,’ he said to her. He patted the arm that lay along the road surface – in fact, had become a part of the road’s surface. The green material of her sleeve was ripped away and her lower arm embedded with gravel. A terrible mewling rose again from somewhere beyond them and Mel screwed up her eyes as though wishing someone, somewhere would just turn it down. She groaned and flopped over onto her back. ‘Oh fuck,’ she breathed but managed to straighten out her legs.

‘You really have got to keep still...’

‘Sam-son.’

‘What?’

Her hand, its palm dark with grit and blood gestured to somewhere else, somewhere vaguely in the direction of town. ‘The fucking horse!’ she shouted furiously.

‘But...’

‘I’m all... right. *Listen!* Go!’

It didn’t occur to him to do anything but follow such fierce instructions. Certainly not to turn back to the car and its occupants. Around the corner he found the animal, half of it lying across the grass verge, the rest (the brown heap of its hindquarters and a pair of threshing back legs) sticking out into Wrexham Road. Across the way a motorcyclist had dismounted but stood, visor down, his back to his machine, not moving. Ahead a white van was pulled up on the opposite verge and its driver just getting out. ‘D’you have a mobile?’ he had to shout above the horse’s terrific bellows which had grown at his approach. The man nodded and fumbled at his belt unable to look away from the animal on

the ground. ‘Call the police and ambulance and – and a vet. Say people hurt – and a horse. Badly injured. OK? Yes? Corner of Old Wrexham Road and Tatten Lane. Yes?’ In a wide curve he walked to the front of Samson. To the approaching van driver he said. ‘Can you go into the lane and check on the girl – the rider – and whoever’s in that fucking car? Can you, please?’ Just as he had felt impelled to do with Mel, he knelt down and patted what was closest – in this case a thick, twitching foreleg with its white sock. Samson rolled his eyes and screamed and a violent shudder travelled along his body. Two iron shoes clattered on the tarmac. Alun pulled his hand away. He could see now the explanation of the creature’s complaint. The upper right foreleg and right shoulder were not so much injured as mashed: there was a reduction to a bloody ragout of tissue where a robust, load-bearing joint had once been. What had become of the hide in this area with its cover of brown hair was a mystery. No sign of it. It was as though this had been completely dissolved in the impact: the guard was off the machine and the works were on show. Creamy subcutaneous fat and the humps of muscle, grey wires connecting this with that, white and pearly-pink shards of bone, all had come spilling out. Incredible that such a blunt-instrument as a car had done this... easier to believe in a shotgun, a bomb blast, a mauling by lions.

The waxing and waning of distress was the result of the animal’s attempt to rise. With stupid persistence, Samson drew his hind legs under him and tried to heave himself up to a comical sitting position. The left foreleg straightened but wasn’t anywhere near up to the job of raising such a weight alone. Repeatedly he slumped back onto the turf as blood and gobbets from the gaping hole in his right side sprayed out. Alun thought of catching at the broken rein that hung from the bit, wondering if he had the strength to hold the suffering horse down. Never having so much as touched Samson in the weeks of their acquaintance (having been

threatened, in fact, by his wayward nature and size) dare he take charge of the animal now, in its last few minutes of life?

Suddenly Mel was beside him. The flayed arm hung by her side and either she or someone else had taken off her hat.

‘Christ, you shouldn’t be up.’

Her face was the colour of plaster and seemed to set as she looked down. ‘I’m all right – just my wrist. Can you help me get this jacket off?’

‘Why don’t you wait for the ambulance? Let them decide...’

Already she had the good arm free. ‘Are you going to help or what?’

Gently as he could, Alun pulled the stiff garment off her. She dropped onto the grass, not able to kneel, and took hold of the bridle. Surely she lacked the strength to hold the head in place? And yet from her touch, beginning in her fingers, some new force flowed. Through the leather of noseband and cheekpieces it shot, through the half-dead-half-living fabric of the straps and into the horse’s jagged nerves. It was as though the animal paused, just for an instant, in its simple program of flight: Mel let go the rein and carefully placed part of the olive stuff of her jacket across Samson’s eyes. The long rasping in his throat continued and he began to grind his teeth, horribly – Alun felt he must be sheering off the enamel with the force of it – but the great legs stilled.

‘Is that what you’re meant to do? To keep them quiet?’

‘I don’t know – how the fuck do I know? It’s just something I’ve seen on the TV.’

Apart from the slowing of the occasional car – to be waved away by Alun – a sort of peace descended on the three of them. Mel sat bare-armed, pale but not crying, not shivering or moving much at all, one usable hand on the horse’s forehead and its blindfold. Her arms, he saw, were nothing like Holly’s; they were more like a boy’s or a younger version of his own, rounded and strong.

Chat was out of the question, surely. Low voices could just

be made out, back in the lane; they'd be huddled around the car, Alun guessed. He dreaded the appearance of anyone else. Certainly to have the driver, the perpetrator of this carnage, come walking up now with explanations, apologies, recriminations... with anything, just any speech at all: Alun felt if that happened he'd be on the bastard straightaway – it was what he could do to stop Mel having to think about it, having to reply.

'Shush-sh.'

Mel was whispering softly to the horse presumably as she felt each agitation beneath her fingers. 'Shush, Samson.' She breathed the comfortable words but stared straight ahead into the empty road. Beneath the jacket Samson's head jerked.

'I couldn't understand,' Alun said, 'why he kept trying to get up. I mean it must hurt him to...'

'It's not in their nature, to be down like this.'

Another spasm wracked Samson's frame; the rounded mass of dark ribcage and belly, overshadowing the covered head, had taken on the look of something helpless, something blubbery and aquatic now stranded on a dry shore.

'Christ, is he?' 'No,' Mel said.

'I thought then – you know.'

'He's going into shock, I think. A horse is a big thing.' Still not looking, still letting the breeze take the brilliant spirals of hair and irritate her dirty cheek with them. 'They're big so they take a while to die.' (So Samson *was* dying. There was relief in this at least, because Mel's surety meant that there was nothing *he* ought to be doing. There were no actions – messy, difficult, are you up to this? – that if performed might save the horse and if not...) 'They live in their bodies, horses, you know? What their bodies are doing, that's them at that moment. That's where they're at. If you don't ride, you can't understand. It's a good way to be. That's what I try to be – as much as I can. You just are what you're

doing and that's it. If you can do that, you can lose all the other stuff – the crap. All the crap with my mum and dad, it's been going on for years and even now – she lives in France now, yeah? With her new bloke. She lives in another country and it can still kick off over nothing. Me... what I'm doing or what she thinks I should be up to. Who owns this really gross painting – that was last thing. He finds it's gone. Two years, then he notices the space on the wall and he's all for going over to get it back because...'

For a moment they could both ignore it and then neither of them could: a siren in the distance but homing in on them, threatening their brittle stasis. Samson heard it, stirred and twitched.

'Shush-sh. I'm not going – if that's the ambulance. I can't leave him till...'

'There's a vet coming,' he said pointlessly.

'I know. Motorbike man said. Thanks.'

A police car, lights flashing but siren now off, drew up a respectful distance away. The policeman who approached was paunchy and near retirement age by the looks of him, sweating as though attending the scene on foot.

'Oh dear.'

Alun stood up and met him on the road to keep between this new intruding figure and the horse. 'She needs to go to hospital. Broken arm at least, I think – God, I don't know, she could be really hurt. But she won't go till someone's dealt with the horse.'

The policeman glanced down at Samson and up again to Alun. What was the matter with the idiot? What didn't he understand? Alun, his back to Mel, raised his index finger to his own temples. 'OK?'

He nodded. 'The other – I mean the vehicle involved in this, sir. Has it been driven off?'

'Just round the corner. You'll find it in front of my house. But stir up that bloody vet will you?'

They sat for what seemed another couple of hours easily,

but was probably only minutes. At one point the policeman came back out of Tatten Lane, talking all the time to a distant agent, removed something from the police car that Alun couldn't see and went back with it in the direction of Carousel. When a Landrover arrived from the opposite direction to that of the police car it was Mel who saw it.

'Hello Peter. I was hoping it'd be you.'

'Hello Mel. You um, hanging in there?'

'Yep.'

Peter was tall and wiry and, dressed in a khaki boiler suit, could have passed for a mechanic, one of those we'll-fix-you-by-the-road-types that Alun had been forced to rely on more than once. Feeling very much the spare part, Alun made space for the vet to kneel between the horse's bent knee and its shrouded head. Peter seemed to ignore the terrible wound from which blood still leaked; he put his hand on the animal's muzzle and pulled at the lower lip. 'Membranes are a poor colour. He's deeply in shock.'

'I know,' Mel said.

'From just what I can see from here,' Peter's contortionist's frame enabled a head-cocked, half-balanced peek into the hole in Samson, 'it looks like lateral head of triceps damage – severe damage... huge amount of tissue loss in the area. Bone fragments might be from the sternum or the ulna or both.' He rocked back and away on his heels but the squeak of rubber boots now failed to set off anything more than a long rattling exhalation from the horse.

'Can you do it now, please?'

'Yes. I think that's the thing to do. Yes. Right, Mel. If you're able to stay there, I'll get my stuff.'

Alun might not have been present: this was to be accomplished by Mel, Peter and Samson, of course. Once Peter had shaved a patch on Samson's neck to insert his lethal injection Alun, more out of curiosity than any distinct purpose, wandered back into Tatten Lane. What met him was an extraordinary scene: across from Carousel on the

narrow grass strip it seemed a family picnic was in progress. A young woman sat on a travel-rug, a grizzling baby ignored in her lap while an older, white-haired woman bent to hand her – to hand her very shakily – a steaming plastic top from a thermos flask. The paunchy policeman stood talking to the seated woman whilst being pulled about and interrupted by a small boy who had him by the hand...

So Samson's executioner: not male, as he'd been convinced for absolutely no reason, but one of these ashen-faced, miserable women trying to explain themselves, failing to care for that baby and that little boy who couldn't be much more than Charlie's age...

Who was Charlie!

'Charlie! What are you doing out here?'

'Policeman, Daddy! I had his hat!'

In confusion, the policeman turned a suspicious face to Alun, 'So is this your car, sir?'

'What? No! I live here. That's my son – we live in this house and I know the girl. The girl who was hit,' he finished for the benefit of the women.

Charlie's cold little hand was passed across to him without a word.

'I didn't see the accident, just heard it from the garden – then when I went out, there was Mel in the road...'

'That's fine, then. Perhaps you'd like to take your little boy inside and I'll have a word with you when I'm sorted here?'

'I think I'll go back and see how she's doing if it's all the same to you. The vet's...' he looked at the seated woman, who looked away. 'Well, the vet's putting the horse down now. Mel might need someone.'

He regretted it as soon as the words were out. Of course he couldn't take Charlie with him back around that corner, where Samson was dying – or dead, by now – was nothing more than a giant shocking carcass beneath the inadequate cover of a Barbour jacket. But as the policeman was about to argue the point an ambulance, its blue light flashing to the

further delight of Charlie, finally arrived. Alun picked the boy up and made to edge past the Merc still half-blocking Carousel's gateway. He should, he knew, offer to take the women and the whimpering baby with him but he clutched the boy hard against his own chest and, 'Come on, Charlie, let's go and get you warmed up,' he said.

'Samson's dead,' Charlie told Holly. 'Who?'

Charlie was curled against her in the chair. Holly's eyes quizzed Alun above the bright, splayed pages of *Billy Penny's Pig*.

'What's he saying?'

'I was going to tell you about it – when he's gone up, though.'

'Oh?'

'Something – not good.'

'Did Charlie see it?'

'Yes, Mummy! Samson's all dead,' Charlie chipped in. 'No. Tell you later... What's that you two are reading? What's the story, Charlie?'

Billy Penny was displayed on the cover astride his flying pig and the advantages of being the owner of a pig that could fly thoroughly enlarged upon. Strangely, although the book had been about the house for over a year and he knew the story by rote, so often had it been a bedtime request, only now did Alun notice the name of the book's author: Don Kellett. When he'd been first employed by Durward's as a new graduate in marketing, the company had been run by a Don Kells. Pushing seventy, Don remembered when Durward's had been a *real leather company* – when it had owned tanneries out in Cheshire and Wales, stench-lapped horror stories of workplaces, cosyng up to the friendly neighbourhood abattoirs, that were also no more. It was Don who'd insisted Alun accompany him to the last Durward tannery just before it closed...

...down a scabby little sideroad, it was. The inhabitants

of a just-visible council estate had left along its length offerings of mattresses, gaping fridges and carpet offcuts: fair exchange for the miasma in which they lived. By the time Don nosed the car into the tannery yard, Alun believed the stink of anything could not be more intense – it was overwhelming his ability to choose words, to think even – but it could. Inside. Inside the tannery building the atmosphere was laden to a level of pungency that was intolerable – and yet men stood about in it, men came forward and joked with Don about *sammying* and *perching* in it. Men said, ‘All right?’ in it to him when he was introduced.

Don Kells: ‘Tanning, it’s got to be the oldest profession bar one, lad. We were at this before farming.’

Don Kells: ‘Nothing like leather, nothing else like it – it’ll keep the water out and yet let the vapour through. Seems like it’s dead but it still *breathes*.’

Don Kells: ‘How long will it last? How long? Well it lasted the beast a lifetime, eh?’

That tannery-stink was back in his nostrils now and on it had risen Don Kells.

The old man would probably be dead. But Alun found he was reluctant to ask Holly though she’d know. Instead he said, ‘Isn’t that book a bit babyish for Charlie now? He seems to have had it for ages. Shouldn’t he be moving on?’

‘But we love Billy Penny, don’t we Charlie? *Mummy* loves Billy Penny. And we do *wish* we had a flying pig.’

‘Did you notice, it’s a bloke’s written it?’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Don Kellett. Reminded me of old Don Kells.’ Holly had no answer it seemed.

‘Anyway, what sort of life is that for a bloke, writing baby books?’

‘So what happened?’

‘Just like Charlie said, I’m afraid. The horse – it belongs

to, you know... Mel Gethin? I told you about her. She's the girl always stops and lets Charlie feed the horse?' Alun lied, not even sure why he was lying as he did it. 'Well 'bout lunchtime some bitch in a big Merc decides she's turning into the lane and the fact that Mel and this bloody great horse are in the way doesn't slow her down one bit.'

'Christ! Where were you? Is the girl all right?'

'I was gardening with Himself. I heard the crunch. I knew it was going to be bad so I popped him in front of Postman Pat and went out. There's the girl in the road – broken arm, I think but really banged about as well. There's this stupid bloody woman – more worried about the car than anything else by the looks of it. And of course there's this mangled horse. It was obvious they'd have to shoot it – half its chest was hanging out, broken leg – but not dead, that's the bummer.'

'Oh, yuk! So what about the driver?'

'What d'you mean? Police breathalysed her but she hadn't been drinking. Just a naturally rubbish driver.'

'Was she hurt?'

'No. Who cares? I was more into trying to clear up her mess.'

A long pause during which Holly got to her feet and began tidying away Charlie's bright detritus into the pine chest, kept in the corner of the sitting room for just that purpose: somewhere in the series of actions there seemed like a reproach.

'You should have seen it! Mel lying in the road – for a moment I thought she must've had it. Then there's this horse, foaming at the mouth – terrible pain it must have been in. Blood, etc. everywhere... Sorry, is this too much detail or something?'

'No. I was listening.' She swept the light fringe from her forehead in a familiar gesture of fatigue. 'I'm glad Charlie... I wondered what he meant about the policeman. He was chattering on about a policeman all the time he was in the

bath... I'm just glad that you managed to keep Charlie out of it.'

'Well I did.'

'Yes.'

'Yes.'

'Perhaps you could take him out tomorrow? For a trip somewhere, just to take his mind off anything he *might* have...'

'But I've said, he didn't. Anyway I thought you wanted the path done, before the winter?'

'I do – of course, I do. It's just one day, though. And it's Wednesday – I'll be late tomorrow. I've got that bloke from Bolton coming in. I told you. He's had two shipments from Pakistan he can't use. Full grain for tooling, you see, but what he's getting isn't taking up the water...'

Alun realised something in his face had caused her to tail off.

In the morning the lane outside Carousel seemed untouched by Tuesday's commotion: a solitary bit of broken hawthorn straggled out over the lane. Then he noticed a series of scrapes on the tarmac – marks that disappeared around the corner along the track of the collapsing Samson – and ghoulishly found he must follow them. A magpie flapped up from the spot on the grass where the horse had dropped and died. 'One for sorrow, two for joy,' he said out loud, as though he had Charlie by the hand and with him, instead of back in the kitchen, wide-eyed at *Pingu* the Penguin, missing his aim with the fingers of toast.

Managing to thorn his hand, he pulled off the broken branch and threw it into the stubble-field across from the house. Briefly he considered getting out the hose and washing away the gobbets of brown blood on the grass; at the tap he saw the impracticality of the plan. No amount of garden hose was going to stretch from the back door of the garage, across the lawn, through the orchard and all the way out into Wrexham Road.

He was unwilling to touch the flagstones or barrow. The only alternative seemed to be to back the VW out with extra care although, today, there wasn't a single other road user in either direction. The uncomplaining Charlie was soon bundled into the back and they were off – but where?

They'd visit Mel – of course, it was the obvious thing to do – it was a five minute drive in the direction of the town centre and The Old Rectory was unmissable in its own little close next to the church... but when he drew up outside the high brick wall and stared up at five sash windows, most of them with pulled blinds, he failed to switch off the engine, made no move to get out.

'What you think, Charlie? D'you think Mel's there? Or in hospital?'

'Where?' Charlie demanded.

'In there. That's where Mel lives. Is she there?'

'Yes!' Charlie shrieked.

'I don't know – I think they'll have kept her in. Her fath... her daddy's a doctor. They'll have kept her in.' Checking his mirror, letting an elderly woman cross in front of him and gain the pavement and checking again, he drove away. 'Let's go to Pendinas,' he said, 'feed the ducks, eh, Charlie?'

It involved a U-turn on an A-road. Bad start.

Opening and dutifully closing the green gate, he drove up through the trees and stopped beneath a sign that read DEEP COLD WATER – STAY WELL BACK FROM EDGE. They were on an area of hard standing right next to the reservoir where only fishermen parked but there were no fishermen today though the air was bright and crisp. It had been a 'white-over' again he realised but the landscape had relaxed now under a low Autumn sun. Alun was glad for the emptiness. No old men or the work-shy, glaring at Charlie's high-pitched yells. The water was smooth enough to show the pattern of the far, wooded shore in its depths and a pair of swans paddled across submerged treetops. Small islands had poked up through the reservoir's surface since their last

visit and gave it now the look of a real lake, a more pleasing place than he recalled. Close in, a handful of mallards gathered into a convoy and made straight for them.

‘Bread for ducks,’ pleaded Charlie. ‘Quick, daddy, quick!’ Of course he had nothing to give the child.

‘*Bread!*’

‘I’m sorry. Daddy’s forgotten it. Nothing for ducks today.’
‘Yes, Daddy! Bread. Now.’

Alun walked parallel to the stone edge of the water letting the boy follow. ‘Bread, Daddy, bread-daddy, bread-daddy’ lessened into low-level whinging – but when he made the mistake of turning around and offering his attention, Charlie seized a piece of fir tree from the path and lunged at the ducks who had been keeping pace. Once sure of being watched he threw the stick at the bobbing birds. They in turn levered their bodies half out of the water to avoid it and scattered. The missile landed harmlessly but Alun’s fury came up like a dark malodorous bubble.

‘Don’t you do that!’ He towered over the child. ‘Don’t you ever do that! How would you like it, if I threw a stick at you?’

Charlie’s eyes grew huge. Any second now the trembling lips would part, the wailing-in-earnest begin.

In one bit of his mind he saw the ridiculousness of it, shouting at the child like that. As a boy, he’d done much the same and worse... and he’d have been older than Charlie – old enough to remember, old enough to know better. Ridiculous. But he didn’t reach down for the sobbing child, just taking his hand for a sullen stroll along the path of the earth dam.

There’s the place, Charlie, look – look through there and you can watch the water running under the bridge! Look between the sleepers! There it goes. Oh, don’t then if you don’t want to see...

He watched a long, thin branch – bleached heartwood, white as an arm – waving beneath the surface, seeming to

cling to its chosen position, before being swept down from sight. In a few minutes more they were back at the car.

Charlie picked at his lunch and went red-eyed to his nap.

That afternoon Alun had a surprise visitor. He was wheeling the last flagstone along the side of the house when he heard the gate open. By the time he'd lowered the barrow a short, linen-suited man was approaching him, one hand held out, offering to shake. 'Alun, is it?'

'That's right.'

'I'm Cliff Gethin, Mel's father.'

'Oh, right.' Clifford Gethin's hand was small but the grip very firm. 'Nice to meet you. I was going to call to ask how she was but I don't have your number. I was going to walk down to the stables when my son gets up – to ask there. How is she?'

'She's... OK.' Mel's father might be slim and neat and looking at him out of Mel's dark eyes but there the resemblance ran out. He was completely bald, sunburnt and with a patch of peeling in progress above tinted glasses; the impression was of someone stopping by on his drive back from the airport. 'She's better physically than mentally.' Very much the doctor, that tone, clipped and professional and a place or two higher up the class league than his daughter's soft local burr. 'The arm was a clean break, the rest's just lacerations. Head's fine because I've always made sure she had a damn good hat on it. But the horse, you know?' Alun nodded. 'I gather from Peter it was grim?'

'Shocking.'

'Exactly. Anyway, she said you were a big help and to say thanks.'

'It wasn't anything. You shouldn't have bothered coming over...'

'No bother. I'm just on my way to the stables. Good old Samson! In death, as in life, he left me with bills to settle.'

Brittany had the wife run off to? Hardly seemed far enough.

'I was beginning to think you'd run off as well,' he challenged Holly. It was nearly nine, freezing and black outside. The *as well* went unnoticed.

'I rang. Had to take it easy – there's fog between here and Chester... black ice.'

She was exhausted: it was obvious in her falling back onto the sofa cushions and wriggling half out of her coat where she sat... in making no move to dash straight up to Charlie.

'Mel's father's Elvis Costello but completely slaphead,' he told her, just after telling her that he thought Charlie might be sickening for something.

'Glasses?'

'Certainly glasses.'

'You didn't take to him?'

'Too right I didn't. His daughter's nearly killed... her horse, well, I won't bore you with going over that again... and all he can talk about is what it's costing him?'

'Well I suppose he's had to pay out a small fortune over the years. But she's OK, you said. Just a broken arm?'

'If that's OK.'

'Oh you know what I mean!' She hauled herself to her feet leaving her impression in the leather of the sofa seat and the creased silk lining of her coat. 'I'll just look in on him – is it a bug, d'you think? It's not like you to make a big deal of things – the girl getting knocked off her horse, I mean. I couldn't get a cup of tea, could I?'

Perhaps real events could be fashioned through fiction. Perhaps Charlie was coming down with something after all. The child was fretful and uncooperative, seeming to become feverish mid afternoons only to cool and sweeten both days at Holly's walking in. Magically the symptoms vanished for the weekend, returned, as did the nuisance early morning fog, for Monday.

'Take him in to the surgery, will you?'

'I don't think there's anything wrong, Hol.'

‘Just to check, then. Oh, it’ll probably be nearer seven if the weather’s bad.’ She swept up her keys from the worktop and had one last scan of the kitchen for anything that still connected her with home, even as her mind wandered out to the car and the journey and beyond the journey. ‘Please. What harm can it do?’

To the young locum Alun said, ‘If it was me, I wouldn’t be here. My wife’s bothered.’ Charlie sat on a folded blanket on the examination table, not flushed, not crying, not cowed in the least by his surroundings.

‘Well, you were bothered enough to have time off to bring him – let’s have a look-see, shall we?’

But the *look-see* revealed nothing other than a touch of inflammation around a late-erupting second molar.

And then there was Mel: when they came out, her brilliant red hair was startling amongst the grey and white heads of those seated around her. So unused was he to seeing her dissociated from Samson, Mel struck him as much smaller than he recalled. A child again, after the adult stoicism he’d witnessed. She was slumped in a corner, her legs drawn in tight and one arm cradling the other in its splint. Only a few days and already the cast, that began at the elbow, was grubby and frayed-looking about the wrist. There was time to note – before she glanced up and recognised him – the darkening of scabs on her hands and the bruise just above her jaw-line, where he’d seen the dirty streak on that day...

‘Hello Alun.’

‘How you doing?’

‘On the mend.’

‘You’re not having the cast off already?’

‘No, worse luck. Fracture clinic in another week.’ She stood up and moved toward the door, out of earshot of the assembled sick. ‘To be honest I don’t know what I’m doing here, really. I’m not sleeping – it’s probably just the arm and everything else aching but Dad said – he won’t give you anything of course! – he said to come and get something...’

‘Right.’

‘I feel stupid now I’m here.’

‘I’m really sorry – about what happened.’

‘Yeah.’

He saw her swallow hard but she wasn’t going to cry on him. Then – horribly – he felt prickling in his own eyes. He was sorry. *He was so sorry. Just a second sooner or a second later and... it shouldn’t have happened.* Only swinging Charlie up into his arms gave him cover to turn away, to say, ‘Well, I’m glad I’ve seen you. I hope... things... work out better. I’m sure your father’s right though. You should get something, just to see you through it.’

Charlie slipped over in the surgery car park: Holly had been right about that black ice. On the dark, dependable-seeming surface his sturdy little legs had buckled and shot him flat onto hands and chin. ‘Come on now! I’ll rub it, shall I? No? Well don’t make a meal of it, then. Be a brave boy. You’re not hurt.’ It set the tone for another day: the child, miserable, complaining, continually badly-done-to and himself, cajoling, snapping, sticking at none of the tasks he began.

What was wrong?

While he scabbled in the freezer to exhume fish for the evening meal, while he sanded down a square of panelling in the hall, he asked himself: what the fuck’s up, Alun? For three years, almost, he’d cared for Charlie and now for whatever reason – for no reason at all – it was as though they’d fallen out of love. Or what he felt for Charlie was getting shot through with needle all the time, just spikelets of annoyance that were enough to... but, of course he loved the child and the child loved him.

His son! A new person, different from himself, Alun, certainly but with Alun as the pattern. A son... a virtual copy, as he was of his father – but closer, more adequately expressed. Him and his father – don’t even go *there*, Alun – it was going to be a hundred times better than it was with

his own father. *And it could only get easier!* As Charlie's boyishness grew, as his gender took a positive form it was Holly that'd find her patience tested. Now when he thought back to the incident at the reservoir it was possible to see it reversed: an omen. The cabinet scraper slipped from his fingers. Rather than retrieve it he ran up to Charlie's bright-painted room and wakened him with stroking his hair. 'Hello Charlie! Are you going to get up, now? Banana and milk – how about that? And then help Daddy paint that fence?' But the child hadn't slept for long enough: Charlie's eyes flickered and he moaned but he turned again beneath his quilt, clutching it to him with two small fists – and Alun found he had to resist the temptation to prise the bunched material from them, to break their grip.

Meaning to fetch milk for his tea, he found a couple of bottles of Becks in the fridge and sat with them out in the garden, his back against the house wall, his buttocks and legs on the modest expanse of terrace he'd managed to lay in that first flush of summer enthusiasm. It was too cold for sitting but not quite chilly enough to force immediate movement. The sun had pierced the white mist at last, somewhere a blackbird (the only bird he could recognise) was cackling boastfully over its possession of the orchard's rotten produce. When the glow of the first bottle hit and the second was started, he saw Charlie out here again, hooting with delight at the newly-arrived pile of red sand, rolling down from the top, gathering a coating as though it were breadcrumbs...

Unidentifiable weeds sprouted from the near face of the heap now and the thrill of rolling was all worn out.

Somehow the brown, fermenting pulp had got into the house. No – not into the house, *through the house*. 'You've trodden it through the house,' Holly said. 'It must've come in on your boots – it's all up the stairs.' It was the weekend (nearly) again, two days he anticipated with pathetic eagerness and they were going to begin it with a Friday night bicker about this?

Alun walked out into the hall. The pale carpet, left by Carousel's previous owners, now showed the partial-prints of his boots. 'It's in Charlie's room, as well, next to his bed,' Holly called after him, 'I thought it was dog shit at first...'

'Oh it could've been worse then.'

'But it's rotten apple.'

'I'll get rid of it.' 'How?'

'I don't know – clean it off – hire one of those machines, if that's what it takes.'

Later they ate across from each other without speaking, the kitchen television showing a sluggish documentary about a party of ologists, trekking through some... where on the trail of some lost... thing. Alun reached to click it off.

'You've started on the panelling – in the hall.'

'Yeah.'

'You don't seem to have got very far.'

'Charlie woke up.'

'Oh.'

He could always tell her about Mel, he thought, how he and Charlie'd met Mel in the waiting room – and later on, how the kid at the garage had said she was going to her mother's in France to get over the accident. How everybody in the shop was saying she'd never get on a horse again – and not because she'd lost her nerve (because Mel was a local byword for nerve) but because *they reckon Samson getting killed like that has broken her heart*. But Holly had had no part in the accident, Holly had no part in what went on in Dial Green, though she'd wanted to come and live out here, no part in the house though it'd been her choice. He stayed quiet and cleared their plates away, topped up their glasses...

'You OK?'

'In what way, OK?'

'Oh come off it, Alun! You're not exactly Mr Chatty, are you?' Eyebrows raised she watched him fill his own glass and stop short just at the point of overflowing. 'And your hands are shaking?'

‘Perhaps I’m coming down with whatever Charlie’s got.’

‘But Charlie hasn’t got anything – you said.’

‘So he hasn’t.’ He’d genuinely forgotten.

The evening dragged on: Dial Green time, that was the way he thought of it. He’d noticed this weird slowing of the hours in the afternoons and now the infection had spread. The evenings were going the same way, stretched out and thinned. There’d been a schools programme on recently, a twenty-minute Janet-and-John exposé of Relativity with a road, a country lane, pulled out and deformed like chewing gum, never reaching the place the signpost indicated but ‘still infinitely long’.

He stood, about to draw the bedroom curtains, but not drawing them, looking down to the dark corner of orchard and beyond to the street light in Wrexham Road. No fog: now that it didn’t matter and Holly was safely home it was all icily clear. A single car passed and after a wait, another in the same direction. Back in Dial Green, the Pendy and the Full Moon were emptying out...

‘Alun?’ Holly was there, behind him, her warm breasts pressed into his back, the scent of her filling the space between himself and the bay window, her arms locking across his chest. He guessed she was waiting for him to speak or react in some way but he was under water – too much trouble to contest it – too much of an effort not to sink down – too tired to... to... no, that was Holly – it was Holly always too tired to but making a huge effort to...

She said, ‘I didn’t know you’d come up to bed.’

‘Do you remember that time – we were in the flat and we were just looking out, just like this and we saw the bag-snatch? That boy, swiping the woman’s bag? And the big bloke chased him for it?’

‘Yes... I remember,’ Holly said.

‘Whose side were you on? I mean did you hope they caught him or he got away?’

There was a long pause while she rubbed her forehead into the nape of his neck. ‘Um-m. Well, the man who was chasing

him, I suppose. Yes, of course. The boy had stolen something – and it did look like a *really* good leather bag. Might have been one of ours.’

Jesus Hol, you’re meant to be just five years ahead of me, not twenty-five!

Or was she joking? He had no idea. Heart hammering! Suddenly and when he’d asked it for no effort – was it expecting to have to fuel a fight? An escape from something that he didn’t know was close? And here was Holly hanging about him, impeding his movements... it was all he could do not to pull her off, push her away. ‘I was standing here and I just realised. How I was on the side of the bloke then – but now I wish the kid had made it – got away with it, you know?’

‘What on earth are you on about?’ She let her arms drop and stepped back.

‘I don’t know. But... something’s got to change, Hol.’

‘I can see that.’

‘Really change.’

‘Yes. I think you’re right. I can really see it. Can we go to bed, though? I’m dead on my feet. We’ve got the weekend ahead of us. And nothing’s happened – what I mean is, we haven’t done anything we can’t go back on. We’re lucky. There’s nothing we can’t fix.’

He peeled off his clothes, left them where they fell and got into bed. Later he felt her slip in beside him in the dark and her hand on his shoulder. Later still, her regular breathing. Sleep wouldn’t come; instead the scene played out again, this time with Holly not answering his question (or not answering quickly enough) and his turning and shaking her by the shoulders till she cried in pain, till she pleaded, ‘I don’t know Alun! Whose side do you want me to be on? The kid running away or the bloke after him? Which one?’ Her fear of him was new and thrilling. It kept his fingers digging into her thin shoulders. It made him want to keep shaking her as long as it lasted.

It could have so easily gone that way.